

# What's Up, Doc?

## A THRILLER HEROINE OPENS UP IN THERAPY ABOUT HER ABDUCTION

By Stephanie Klose

In *Still Missing*, Chevy Stevens' debut, out this month from St. Martin's, Annie O'Sullivan is a struggling realtor on Vancouver Island. Abducted from an open house, she is kept in a remote cabin for a year by a man she refers to as "The Freak."

Each chapter is a session with her therapist in which Annie talks about her imprisonment, the psychological and physical abuse she endured, her eventual escape and the police investigation into The Freak's identity and motives.

Although the events that play out, both in the cabin and after Annie is back, are often grim and frightening, Stevens never crosses into gratuitous or salacious violence or sexual content, a line that the author felt strongly about maintaining. "I wanted to be authentic and truthful to what would happen in that situation," she says, adding, "I didn't set out to write a story that was shocking or a scary thriller, and the book has a stronger emotional bent because of that."

The tale grew out of Stevens' own experiences as a real estate agent on Vancouver Island, where she grew up on a horse farm and still lives with her husband and dog, Annie, after whom she named her character. "When you're a new realtor, you spend a lot of time at open houses," she explains, and much of it by yourself. Stevens spent her alone time daydreaming and "scaring myself with the terrible things that could happen to me."

It led her to think about what would happen "if you were abducted and gone for a while. What would happen when you came back? Who would take care of my dog? What would my boyfriend do?"

The general idea bounced around her head for a couple of months, gradually building momentum until one day she "heard Annie's voice telling the story, so angry about it," and Stevens immediately "walked upstairs and started writing session one."

Stevens found that writing the first draft was "a way of channeling my own emotions," of growing up with an alcoholic father, but she's quick to point out that the actual events that unfold in the book didn't happen to her.

"Even though Annie's story is not the same as mine, this is a very personal story in a lot of ways," Stevens explains. "I was writing my own worst nightmare, exploring my own pain, while trying to be very sensitive to the subject matter."

Stevens continues, "The Freak is a composite of everyone who's ever hurt me. When I had to work on a clear pathology for him, I figured out that he had a story with his own motivations and was able to understand why he thought he was doing the right



thing." She adds that exploring the character, "helped me understand people in my life and why they did the things they did."

About her candor in discussing her own past, Stevens says that in the early stages of promoting the book, she was hesitant to share any personal information. Then she realized that "not talking about the alcoholism was dishonoring the message of the book. Annie needed to learn that it was OK to let down her walls and talk about things" in order to heal — and so do the rest of us.

"The process of writing this book changed my life in a million ways," Stevens says, "not just as a career, but emotionally. I worked

through things by writing when I couldn't vocalize.

"You're reading my therapy," she adds.

Stevens decided to structure the book as a series of Annie's sessions with a psychiatrist as a way to show the character's growth. "I'm really interested in psychology, because of my own upbringing," she says. "I'm always trying to figure out the emotions behind everything. This gives the characters a way to do that themselves."

The narrative shifts between Annie's first-person passages, when she's talking about her own experiences, and second person, in which she addresses the doctor directly. Stevens says the second-person parts were hard to write, but necessary so that readers can form an impression of the therapist. "It's hard to flesh out a character that you never actually see," she says.

Stevens' next book will be structured in the same way, with a new character talking to the same therapist. "It's challenging to not have the character sound the same as Annie," she says, "but she's known the therapist longer," so they have a different dynamic. A planned third book will be the therapist's own story.

The author's own reading selections are "all over the charts." She says she "will read just about anything if I connect with the character" and notes an affinity with "people trying to get out of their pain."

And so she is "really touched when people care about Annie," especially when readers recognize — and are inspired by — the fact that she is "a woman who is struggling and owning that and wanting to be more than she is in that moment." ♦

Visit the author at [ChevyStevens.com](http://ChevyStevens.com).

St. Martin's is giving away copies of *Still Missing* to five RT Book Reviews readers. See page 128.